

Places in Making:
A Spatial Reading of Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.in/Narcopolis-Jeet-Thayil/dp/0571283071>

Abstract

Place is not an emptiness to be filled; rather it is in constant metamorphosis from human actions. The focus on materiality and the awareness of location function as a significant feature of postcolonial Indian fiction. Instead of the traditional notions of place as an unchanging entity and passive background, place is perceived as a dynamic force and cultural construct in contemporary Indian fiction. Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* offers an insight into the culturally produced places in the urban landscape. Spatiality is projected as caught in the unending process of cultural production. The linguistic, technological, economic and cultural forces are perceived as playing a significant role in the spatial production of places at different scales. The novel depicts the constructed nature of places, the process of spatial construction, the spatial heterogeneity, the close tie between spatial and the social etc. Heterogeneity of the places is underlined in the course. Places at various scales are exposed as subject to power plays. The urban places are projected as the situated places for the working of class, race, gender and the like.

Keywords: Jeet Thayil, *Narcopolis*, Place, Urban Space, Cultural Production, Power, Spatiality and Heterogeneity

An appreciation of space is central to the colonial discourse analysis. The preoccupation with space involves the concept of abstract spatiality and awareness of location as a factor. The readings of abstract space see it as a 'social product' and a 'cultural construct'. Space is not an emptiness to be filled; rather it is in constant metamorphosis from human actions. Privileging of space in post colonial studies is followed by a similar tendency in post colonial fiction. Placing the city within the frame work of colonial history and post colonial politics, form a major part of present day novels.

Jeet Thayil is an Indian poet, novelist and musician. He is most famous as a poet and is the author of four collections of poetry- *These Errors Are Correct*, *English*, *Apocalypso* and *Gemini*. His first novel, *Narcopolis*, which won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, was also shortlisted for the 2012 Man Booker Prize and The Hindu Literary Prize.

Jeeth Thayil's *Narcopolis* is an attempt to narrate the fast-changing urban city space of Bombay. The real and imagined history of Bombay across time is narrated so as to bring the diachronic space of the postcolonial urban space. It opens in the 70s with the narrator's arrival in Bombay, chronicles the early nineties in detail, and arrives in 21st century as the narrator returns to Bombay after his visit to his own native land. It also marks a change from the old 19th century romantic, quiet, slow world of opium, to the modern degrading world of cheap heroin.

Narcopolis can be read as a spatial novel that addresses the spatial politics of the urban places. The spatiality of the novel is evident in the presentation of all the different places ranging

from the city to the body. Thayil narrates in detail the constructed nature of places, the process of spatial construction, the spatial heterogeneity, the close tie between spatial and the social, the place bound propriety rules etc. The work is also noted for the transcendental journey across the borders of time and space, across the boundaries of body and nation.

Spatiality of *Narcopolis* is suggested in the beginning of the novel itself. The story of *Narcopolis* is described as, “not fiction or dead history but a place you lived in once and cannot return to . . .” (Thayil 2), and the novel starts with defining itself as a story about “Bombay, which obliterated its own history by changing its name and surgically altering its face . . .” (1). Thus the spatial politics of the novel is underlined in the beginning itself by asserting the shifting nature of its overlapping layers. What the novel attempts to trace is an ever shifting nature of places against changing times. The city of Bombay is presented as a location of change in the beginning of the novel itself. This change is perceived as happening in its ideology/ and in its material geography. Naming process is revealed as indicative of an icon of spatial/cultural changes.

Subsequently, the spatiality that *Narcopolis* projects, is a constantly changing one. The changing nature of the cityscape is portrayed many times in the novel. Sometimes these spatial changes may be primarily related to the changes in the material landscape: “The city had changed, but it was still a conglomeration of slums on which high-rises had been built . . .” (Thayil 269). The urban landscape is changing with the corresponding changes in the material, cultural and institutional places in the city. At the same time, these new constructions in the city spaces are presented as marked with traces of class relations.

The shifting nature of places is accompanied by their heterogeneity. The taken for granted fixity of the material places of the city is laid against the fluidity and diversity of the lived spaces in it. Each and every place in the city is caught in the ongoing processes of cultural inscription. The description of Shuklaji Street reveals the material geography of the city in contrast to its cultural spaces. Thus the street is defined both in terms of its geographical position and in terms of its cultural occurrence: “But it stretched roughly from Grant Road to Bombay Central and to walk along it was to tour the city’s fleshiest parts, the long rooms of sex and nasha. In the midst of it, Rashid’s opium room . . .” (Thayil 135-136). The perception of the street in the cartographical representations of the city is contrasted with the ever-changing lived spaces. Places are exposed as receiving meanings from the lived practices and cultural activities.

Places are also made out of cultural interactions and everyday practices. Any place is a meeting place of the dynamic forces of spatial imaginations, perceptions, practices and cultural interactions. Rashid’s Khana in the Shuklaji Street is such a dynamic meeting point of various cultural activities. Thus someone like Rumi who “came to talk as much as to smoke” in Rashid’s Khana add his own meanings to the place (Thayil 159). Similarly, many of the visitors to the

Khana are opium tourists and they arrive there after being driven by some spatial imaginations about the place. Thus the meaning of the place is constantly re-inscribed by the imaginations, perceptions and interactions of the people. As Edward Soja emphasizes in his theorizations over *thirdspace*, a place like khana receives added meanings along with its primary and secondary levels of spatial existence as a building in the Shuklaji Street and a selling place of opium (*Thirdspace* 31).

The city is seen as a place marked by the heterogeneous spatial experiences. The varied spatial experiences in the urban landscape make it a meeting place of many times at a single point. The heterogeneity of the city also arises from the relative nature of spatial existence. Thus Dom experiences a unique feeling as he stands in Rashid's khana along with Newton Xavier: "For a moment I saw the room from a stranger's eyes; I saw a wavering image, unreal, something out of the sixteenth century. I stood there in my bell-bottoms and I felt like an interloper from the future come to gawk at the poor and unfortunate who lived in a time before antibiotics and television and aeroplanes" (Thayil 38). The relativity of spatial perception also is presented as adding to the plurality of the city. An individual's experience of the city is conditioned by his body and its physical conditions and cultural makeup. The relative positions as an insider or outsider, self or stranger, traditional or modern etc. affect the nature of spatial experience.

Mental perceptions and spatial imaginations are shown as playing a significant role in experiencing the city. Past and present is caught up in an entangled web of connections. Spatial and temporal experiences are perceived in a non-linear way: "I dreamed it was twenty years earlier, in 1984, and I was in Colaba" (Thayil 266). Instead of places, what Thayil presents is the concept of 'place-times' (Grosz *Space, Time and Perversion* 84). This movement between different temporal lines is occasionally presented in the novel: "Where had he been for twenty years? . . . This is the past, he said, not the present" (Thayil 266). Experiences of the city spaces are far different from their authentic representations. Past and present becomes relative conditions for the body in its experience of the city.

Plurality of the places also arises from the reality of intertwined spaces. The overlapping layers of linguistic, technological and economic spaces make any place a complex entity. Thayil highlights the existence of diverse linguistic spaces in the city by introducing characters like Lee, Rasheed, Dom and Jamal speaking Chinese, Hindi, Marathi and English respectively. Some of these characters are bilingual too. There are also references to the technologically affected linguistic spaces in the urban landscape. There are thus occasions when the narrative voice traces the techno linguistic feature of the city: "He thought of the strange one-word text messages Jamal and his friends sent each other: 'gr8' and 'rotflmfao' and 'ftds'" (Thayil 280). The changes in communication and technology have affected the linguistic practices of the urban spaces.

Thayil also hints at the way by which these modern linguistic expressions add to the heterogeneity of the city as the practitioners “distilled communication down to its essence: guttural exclamation, partial understanding, indifference” (280). At the same time, these changes are shown as intensifying the spatial distances and cultural differences of people. These distinct linguistic practices create numerous cultural spaces in the same urban geography.

The shifting nature of places is rooted in its constructed nature. City is a combination of material and cultural artifact. It is produced through every day social practices, customs, and interventions (Lefebvre 170). Thus it is constantly in the process of making and becoming. It is an open ended process. The existing traces are modified by the addition of new traces at every time. Skipping any possibility of rigid representative process the lived practices of the city make it fluid and shifting. City’s constructed nature is revealed in the narrative voice that puts his thoughts as it that of Dimple: “that the city was a large accumulation of small defeats, nothing more, and each new arrival to the city brought his own minuscule contribution to the inexhaustible pile” (Thayil 265). City is produced out of the numerous processes of trace making. City is also formed out of trace formations via spatial conflicts. Cultural conflicts leave its own inscriptions on the material place of the city. The city is shown as having traces immediately after the riots. Thus, Dimple watches ‘the shell of a burned taxi’(198), ‘smouldering taxicabs’ and ‘burning trucks’ at the streets in riot times (200). The ‘smell of charred flesh hung in the air’ too is kind of cultural trace left behind by riots (207-). There are also scenes of dead bodies lying unattended in the street in the riot times (203).

The constructed nature of city spaces are indicated in the saying “the street belongs to whoever takes it” (Thayil 154). Places are subject to cultural production of political forces. It is fashioned according to the interests of those who are in power. The city’s destiny is decided by the countless social encounters and the deeds of the individual bodies who occupy it: “the city was a pen for unchaperoned children, wild boys and girls who were bringing themselves upon their own, begging, stealing, selling, stoning . . .” (281). Thus bodies are presented as deciding the nature of the city. Even a term like ‘Hijde ki Galli’ (211) represents the way by which body decides the city places. City’s cultural construction is depending on the bodies in it.

The Playhouse Lodge, where Rashid opens his new opium room after the closure of his Khana in the Shuklaji street clearly shows the culturally produced nature of city spaces. It bears the traces of colonialism as its ‘grand colonial name’ name announces its colonial connections (Thayil 212). As the name indicates it was a theatre once- a drama house that might have served as a platform for many artistic performances. Its material construction with ‘three storeys, peaked roof, gothic parapets and arches’, marks its relation to the dominant classes who might have designed it once. At the same time its gothic parapets make it a spatial representation of another space in another time. The present name of the place as *Pilahouse*, with a phonetic

variation of the original name indicates the spatial appropriations to which it has been subjected to, with an addition of a nonsensical bilingual meaning, *yellowhouse* attached to it. Lived practices of the place make it an opium room in spite of the conceived spatiality as a play house/a lodge. The place's shift from a play house to a lodge and from there to a drug selling centre, announces spatial transformations happened in the place throughout history. Thus the place becomes an embedded place with layers of meaning attached to it- colonialism, culture, history and modernity. The place becomes the site of situated practices of spatial imaginations, spatial transformations, spatial representations, spatial appropriations and spatial practices.

The technological interactions in the city turn it a 'technospace' (Appadurai) and bring its effects on bodies. Thus the "People brandished new cellphones and laptops . . ." (Thayil 281) speaks for the cultural making of bodies in a capitalized world. Both the place of the body and that of the city bears the imprints of the technological impacts and the traces of the homogenizing tendencies of a globalised world. For instance, the staff whom Dom meets in Jamal's office has distinct linguistic features: "their accents full of the new intonations of cable TV and recognizable anywhere in the world, America via Friends and Seinfeld" (272). Similarly, the woman whom Farheen and Jamal meets in the glass elevator is an example of the multilevel spatial existence as she is simultaneously talking through two cell phones to different people in different places. Even though her name is Natasha (a Russian name) and she works in a Hindi speaking community, she uses English with South American accent for her everyday communications (281). Bodily practices and cultural encounters too leave its enduring marks on city space.

City spaces are subject to the new economic relations of the globalised world. Soporó's symbolic speech about the self-destruct machines draws attention to the working of 'Empire' on the modern world: "But the idea is that companies design products with a short life, like the pretty computers I see these days, with the shiny logos, the biblical half-eaten fruit and so on, pretty objects that are built to self-destruct, so you buy another in a few years, and another and another, and in that way you feed the insect empire . . ." (Thayil 256). The capitalist forces that decide the nature of modern geographies is made well explicit here. The urban landscapes are shaped the by the market relations and the profit driven motives of Multinational Companies in the globalised world.

At the same time, any place is a product of the political forces. They are created by a numerous processes controlled by power. The city as a cultural construction is well echoed by the officer named Tung in speaking to Lee about the way by which the city of Wuhan is turned as a site of 'social experiment': "Wuhan is a test case, he said. Everything happens here: the plague, riots, surplus productivity, famine . . . everything. We believe Peking is using us as a kind of social experiment. They want to see how much punishment a city can take before it shuts

down” (Thayil109). Thus city and almost all the spatial practices in it are exposed as politically planned and executed. The spatial and social conflicts in the city are planned and executed by the power centers. The nature of places is also affected by the ideological writings on them. The cultural inscriptions on the landscape are hinted in Rashid’s casual reflections on the effect of various policies and ideologies on Indian soil: “the years of regulation and control and planned socialism . . .” (153). Thus places marked with national boundaries and the various spaces in them are shown as affected by the cultural inscriptions by means of policies and guiding principles of the State.

Places are also political. Place is subject to manifestation of power. The political inscriptions on the place are reflected in the rigid spatial organization and the placing of material and cultural boundaries. The places are marked different types of boundaries- material, religious, cultural, linguistic, economic etc. For example, the ‘wrought-iron railing of Wilson College to the beach’ (Thayil 56) is a material boundary. Whereas Rumi’s long speech distinguishing the people as Kashmiris, Keralites, Bengalis, Marathis etc. show how the bodies are simultaneously bordered in terms of region, religion, language and spatial practices (214). Similarly there are references to national borders (58). Everyday manifestations of the nationalist divisions are made explicit in speaking about cricket commentaries, “I listened to the old Hindu–Muslim sibling anxieties recycled in the guise of expert commentary” (271). It is also a cultural occurrence that is marked with the situated practices of the spatial conflicts over national borders. Places and spatial divisions thus manifest through the everyday practices of the city and affects the lives of the people.

Each place constructs its identity by separating itself from other spaces and places. Places are the sites for the situated practices of class, race, religion and gender. The cultural boundaries across the city spaces are suggested by the woman whom Newton Xavier meets in the city space: “No wine. This is a Muslim locality, babuji, what do you expect?” (Thayil50). It shows how the city spaces are religiously marked and culturally bordered. Religious marking on the material places have effects on the bodily practices.

Places also act as the forces that can shape the lives of people. They are presented as playing a significant role in the constitution of identity. Spatiality’s influence on bodies is made explicit through individual’s memories and dreams as suggested in Dimple’s description of her dreams (Thayil 60) and Lee’s narration of his memories (76). Lee connects history to the different places by describing the rooms he had lived in: “the house he’d taken as an officer, the mud-floored house he grew up in, hotels he’d lived in for weeks on end, rooms in Rangoon, Chittagong, Delhi and cities he’d forgotten the names of” (76). Spatiality becomes the defining marks of one’s existence. Thus both the memories and the dreams are revealed as extremely spatial. It underlines spatiality as the underlying force of all cultural practices.

The construction of identities by means of overlapping spatialities is suggested in Tai's description of Lee, "He's a Chini" (Thayil57), meaning that he is a Chinese man in an Indian city. 'Chini' refers to the presence of a 'Chinese citizen' living in the Indian soil. At the same time, this unique spatial existence as a 'Chini' differs from that of an Indian or American (125). It is also an instance when geographical occurrence and cultural coding is expressed in linguistic terms.

The spatial positioning of identities in various material and cultural spaces are shown as affecting one's cultural experiences. The possibility of the power systems to bring about changes in the spatial existence of bodies by changing the cultural inscriptions on bodies and places is suggested in Dimple's question regarding "what it was like to lose a war and a homeland at one stroke and to travel for a long time and arrive in a place where no one knew you" (Thayil65). Operations of power are exposed as bringing far reaching impacts on body resulting even spatial and cultural displacement of bodies.

Urban experiences are decided by the physical positioning of bodies. And the experiences of city become all a matter of one's relative position in it: "From a rickshah, the city was all exhaust, face-level and toxic" (Thayil 270). The class relations act as the controlling force for the spatial distribution of bodies and the spatial positioning determine one's spatial and social experiences.

As Foucault argues, "space is fundamental in all exercise of power" ("Space, knowledge and power" 252). Thayil underlines the power laden nature of places and exposes the close tie between the social and the spatial. The urban encounters are conditioned by the one to one relation between the spatial and social. The spatiality of the exclusionary politics is symbolically expressed in the suggestion that the narrator receives from the driver as he is on the way to Rashid's. Assuming that Dom is on his way to the 'cages'/ brothels, the driver advises him to look for the numbered houses- brothels that a little more costly: "Number houses better . . . the women in the cages, 'these girls dirty . . ." (3). Thus the 'brothel with the red number on its door, 007' with the specially graded bodies in it denotes its material and cultural existence in the Shuklaji street with its own marked boundaries separating it from the 'cages' and other 'numbered houses'.

The city spaces as the sites for the situated practices of class, culture and power is made explicit in the reference to 'Pathar Maar' episode in the novel. The arrival of the Pathar Maar in the city, with his careful killing of the poor, is not inviting much public attention. It simply remains 'an underworld whisper', because 'nowhere-ness' is the spatial setting of the lives taken by Pathar Maar: "no one noticed because his victims were more than poor, they were invisible

entities without names or papers or families . . .” (Thayil 2). Thus the spatiality of the subaltern is presented as a kind of ‘nowhere-ness’. The bodies inhabit in nowhere-lands are provided with specific social experiences. The positioning of bodies in particular material and cultural spaces decides ones social experiences of cultural inclusion, social exclusion, estrangement or alienation.

Places at various scales are also marked with economic relations. The spatial arrangements of a place are decided through its placing in distinct economic structures. For instance, the poverty and desolation of a place like Murugan Chawl shows the traces of economic relations as embedded in the city spaces. There are also references to the nameless places in the city like the slum near Bandra East, “so poor it didn’t have a name . . .” (Thayil 251). So the economic set up acts as a deciding factor of a place’s visibility or invisibility in the cultural landscape.

The exclusionary politics of the city in connection with its economic relationship is presented through the strange perceptions of Rumi who is excited in thinking about the possibilities of “a great firebomb that would end the poverty and desolation of Murugan Chawl, a big beautiful explosion that would engulf the entire slum and blow its inhabitants straight into the next world” (Thayil 251). The urban centers are exposed as ever longing to eliminate its margins. The individual manifestations of the same is evident in the reference to ‘Pathar Maar’. Rumi’s appearance in the city as the killer of the poor in the disguise of a ‘Pathar Maar’ (261) shows how the power relations in the city are longing to erase the poor from the city spaces. Rumi’s definitions of those who found deserved to be killed, to be displaced from the city shows spatiality of life that reflects the traces of social exclusion in them. Thus the beggar woman’s spatiality of the body and the spatiality of her existence along with the same spatialities extended to her son serve as the sufficient justification to be eliminated. Cultural marking of insanity adds power to this exclusion: the insane woman who lived under Grant Road Bridge, the lice-infested crazy woman with her lice-infested baby (261).

The spatial exclusion of the identities like refugees in the cultural map of the city is indicated in saying that they are living in small rooms only (Thayil 64). Dom’s reflection over the thoughts that follow the arrival of a man in to the opium room too is indicative of the situated nature of racism in the day to day cultural encounters of the city: “man so black he could have been African, with a red mouth that smelled of sweat and sewage, and for a moment Rumi thought it was the devil in his natural state, blackened and sooty and looking for company, or the devil freshly returned from the flames of hell . . .” (Thayil 231). The everyday encounters of the people in the city are driven by racial politics.

A landscape cannot be a neutral agent or empty container. Places are also conflict zones where the power relations and struggles in a society often manifest. There are also references to the politically decided places within any geographical boundary that serves to act as the disciplining force. Thus Thayil describes in details the workings of the disciplinary places like prison (87, 238), Rehabilitation Centre (229-244) and the labour camp in China (87-88). Along with instances of divisionary and exclusionary spatial politics, power also operates in the disciplinary practices of various spatialities. There are references to the governmental and non-governmental strategies of discipline. Thus someone like Ling Ling, the translator and writer, is sent to the labour camp and then to the prison, for her denouncement of this dominant voice of the President (87). The police/prison exercises its disciplining power by imposing violence on bodies as seen in the evident of Salim's murder (203) and the police violence on pocket maar's body (131). The Rehab is presented as a place with the instructive strategies of normalization for disciplining the deviants (229-244). Even the place of home is exposed as a power ridden place with its disciplinary and regulatory practices (266-267). Rumi's recalling of his relationship with wife presents the place of home a conflicted site. Thus Rumi, 'a high-caste Hindu' explains himself as a disciplining figure in the home: "I beat my wife once or twice a month. . . I had to teach her the inevitability of obedience. I knew my duty even if she did not"(266-267). At the same time, he treats it as his sacred duty to "teach the low-born . . . radiance and humility, also endurance" (267). Thus various places and spaces are shown a repressive and regulatory in nature. Material and institutional places are revealed as deeply political. It turns them as contentious sites.

In conclusion, *Narcopolis* is revealed as an illustration of the politically driven nature of places. Thayil exposes the power laden nature of places so as to highlight the spatial aspect of power. *Narcopolis* sheds light on the political nature of places which make them conflict zones. The novel locates urban places as caught by the violent inscriptions of power. It also reveals the complex overlaps and contradictions between different spatial scales of city, home and body. The novel seeks to function as a political strategy against the imperialism of our times and spaces, in the era of the technological and economic globalization.

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